

“LATIN QUARTER” IN AN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN METROPOLIS? Model-based thematic regeneration of the Southern Downtown of Budapest

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ABSTRACT

With the EU subsidies ex-socialist East-Central European countries got a unique possibility for the regeneration of their run-down historic city centres, but the efficient investment of funds often meet difficulties due to their modest experiences in urban regeneration. The adaptation of western models seems to be a proper way to follow, as by taking the example of the Parisian Latin Quarter for the thematic regeneration of the Southern Downtown of Budapest, but cultural differences make the applicability of these models questionable. A case study of the Budapest site analyses how the Latin Quarter model has been applied, covering the bases, the concept, the implementation and the results of the process. Results show that the regeneration process based on public space renewal was able to transform the area into a youthful, bohemian Latin Quarter that attracts both locals and tourists. Adapting prudentially chosen models in similar cases can overcome cultural differences.

Keywords: urban regeneration, historic centre, public space, Budapest

INTRODUCTION

The political transition in 1990 and the EU accession in the mid 2000s opened new ways for urban development in the ex-socialist East-Central European countries. Although these changes found the historic city centre of the Hungarian capital Budapest in fairly run-down conditions, the city was not able to manage a comprehensive renewal program that time. The realized fragmented interventions had only moderate local influence. By the 2000s, the massive population loss of the inner districts made the need for the rehabilitation of the eclectic city centre imperious. Due to the economic prosperity of the era a quick urban development process evolved following West-European models.

In 2006, the regeneration of the downtown areas has taken a new direction with the Heart of Budapest urban renewal program. Later on, as one of the new conceptual elements, the formation of a so-called “Latin Quarter” in the southern part of the historic city center was framed, using the Parisian Latin Quarter as a model for the regeneration. This paper analyses the regeneration process of the area that resulted that a lively, bohemian, youthful area was born that changed the image of the historical city center and appeared on people’s mental map as well.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The initial question of this study referring to its title is whether the example of a thematic quarter can be adapted and applied as a model for urban regeneration in a different cultural environment. A further question of the research is how the model affects the conceptualization of the regeneration process. Third, which are the factors that affect the efficiency of the application of the model in an other culture? And finally, if it is possible at all to achieve the ambitions that were defined by the model.

To answer these questions we used a case study approach. First, an attempt is made to define the Latin Quarter model by giving a short review on the Parisian example and to clarify those common characteristics that create the relation between the two sites and allow the adaptation of the Parisian model to the Budapest site. After that, an introduction is given to the emergence of the Latin Quarter concept during the planning process as a possible way for the regeneration of the Southern Downtown of Budapest. Then, we describe the implementation process of the renewal to see how the model was shaped to local particularities. Lastly, an analysis of the results reveals whether the use of the Latin Quarter model in Budapest reached its original purpose.

2. THE PARISIAN LATIN QUARTER AND THE LATIN QUARTER MODEL

First of all, before starting to deal with our study area it is essential to draw up what we understand under the notion of „Latin Quarter”. The basic point of reference for our study is the famous Latin Quarter of Paris, France. By giving a short review on its main characteristics and values, an attempt is made to define the Latin Quarter model and its evolution and to see how it has been interpreted and applied in urban practice.



Historic setting and local services in the Latin Quarter of Paris (courtesy of Benkő, M.)

Amongst the factors that determined the evolution of the Parisian Latin Quarter, the physical characteristics of the environment as well as some human factors and values need to be mentioned. Physical characteristics include central location, the presence of nature (riverside), urban structure (organic street pattern and elegant boulevards), historic building stock and monuments. Human factors primarily refer to the

presence of the prestigious institutions of higher education and related people including students, intellectuals and artists. The concentration of all these factors determined the evolution of the area during the last centuries.



Latin Quarter with the Sorbonne buildings (after Benkő, 2010, orthophoto: Google Earth)

Our interpretation of the Latin Quarter model covers the evolution process as well, that might reveal certain particularities when analyzing different examples, like that of the case of Budapest. In the case of the traditional Latin Quarter of Paris a long-term and mainly spontaneous evolution process can be observed. This process had three main consecutive stages. The first step was the concentration of higher educational institutions in a centrally located historic urban setting with educational buildings dispersed into the urban fabric. After that a great number of cultural and entertainment facilities appeared serving the demands of the students and the area transformed into a lively, trendy residential quarter, an integrated university town (Benkő, 2010). Finally, during the 20th century with the flush of tourism the same features converted it into a prosperous tourist destination. As a result of the process, the term “Latin Quarter” today is used as a synonym for an exciting, bohemian, youthful and lively urban environment with excellent educational, artistic and cultural features. These characteristics make it an attractive destination as a workplace for the creative class and as a place for living and visiting as well.

The idea of the Latin Quarter appeared in other francophone cities as well, like in the case of the late 19th century Montréal, Canada. The “Quartier Latin” of Montréal was named after the French ancestor and it is the place where the first university of the city was settled. The traditional bohemian quarter today forms part of the Quartier des Spectacles, the entertainment district of Montréal's downtown. The culture-led regeneration of the area started in 2002 and along the development of cultural facilities it was based on the comprehensive renewal of the quarter's public spaces, creating a unique, identifiable atmosphere of spectacle (Cameron & Bélanger, 2012). Interestingly, even in Paris itself there are contemporary initiatives to create “new Latin Quarters”. As part of the Paris Rive Gauche urban renewal program aiming to rehabilitate huge riverside areas of the city, the former industrial area of Masséna Nord is being transformed to a new university quarter, that returns to the ancient model of the Latin Quarter by integrating the university into the city (Benkő, 2010). Beside hosting a number of new educational and other cultural institutions, the project builds also on the inclusion of alternative cultures and *off* cultural scenes like the Frigos site, using them as a tool for the regeneration of the city as a creative and open place to work, invest, create and live (Vivant, 2010).

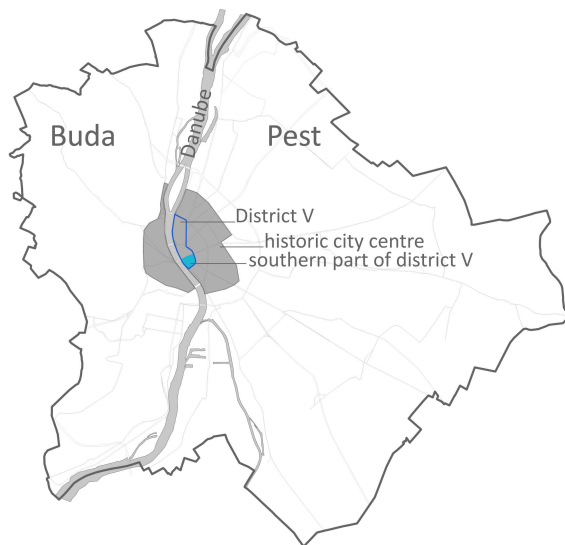
3. THE CASE OF THE SOUTHERN DOWNTOWN, BUDAPEST

The idea of creating a Latin Quarter in the southern part of the Budapest downtown emerged only a few years ago. First, the case study gives a general overview on the situation of the city centre before the interventions, covering the positioning of the area, the physical and social conditions and urban functions as well. It ranges also the presentation of the cultural and historic background and other factors influencing its

evolution. Secondly, a short introduction enlightens the emergence of new concepts, including that of the Latin Quarter that changed the vision on the future of the area. This is followed by the description of the implementation process, based on public space rehabilitation projects. Finally, we analyse the consequences and results of these recent interventions.

3.1. The situation before the interventions

To understand the challenges the city has to face nowadays, it is necessary to have a general overview on the city and its historic and cultural background. A common geographic attribute of the urban structure of Paris and Budapest is that a large river crosses both historic cities with important administrative centres on both sides. Budapest as metropolis was born in the end of the 19th century with the aim of creating a counter-balance to Vienna within the Austro-Hungarian empire. Today, the downtown of the city in general is identified with District V. on the Pest side, on the left bank of the Danube. The district is formed by two main parts: the area of the medieval city of Pest with its organic street pattern on the south and the planned extension on the north, that functions as the administrative and business centre of the Hungarian capital. The forty years of the socialist era after World War II left grave impacts on the historic city. As the communist regime was not interested in the reconstruction of the “bourgeois” city, the inner districts rapidly became devastated and lost great part of their traditional bourgeois functions and inhabitants. A further factor that led to the decline of the downtown was the impact of modernist urban planning that sliced the historic tissue with overloaded transit roads, designated for through-fare traffic. Not only the physical environment changed a lot during this period, but also the way of living had to adapt to the socialist moral. The political changes of 1990 appear as a crucial turning point, followed by the re-privatization of the building stock and the transition to the capitalist economy and consumer society. However, the decline of the historic centre continued due to the lack of public and private funds for urban regeneration and the fairly uncontrolled market-led changes of the urban structure (sub-urbanisation, formation of new subcenters around newly developed shopping malls within and in the vicinity of the historic city centre).

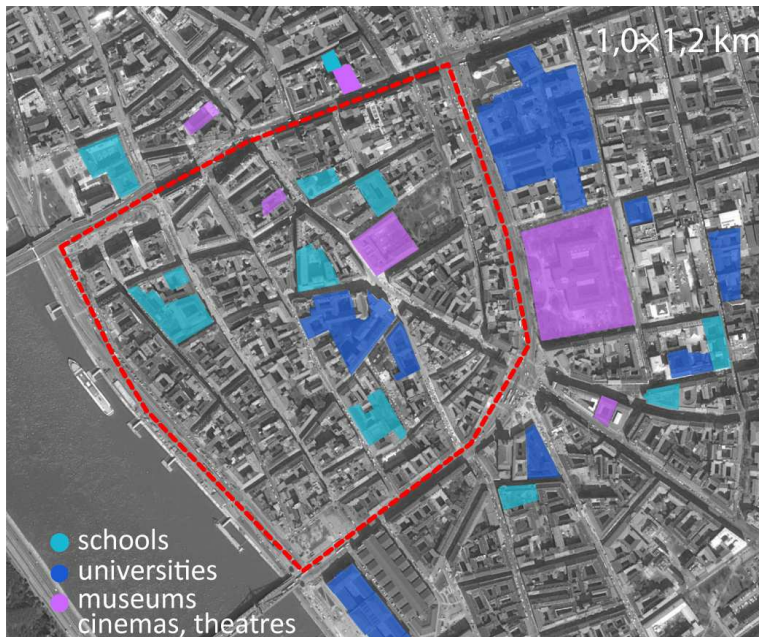


Map of Budapest

3.2. Emergence of concepts for the regeneration of the historic downtown

A second turning point in the recent development of the Pest downtown is closely linked to the EU accession of Hungary in 2004. The promise of EU subsidies for urban regeneration let politicians and planners think in big. In the mid 2000's, new concepts appeared about the regeneration of the Budapest downtown. Many of them were prepared for the Heart of Budapest international design competition in 2006. The same year, after the political elections a new district municipality government started to implement the re-positioning of the downtown. A new integrated development strategy (IUDP-BL, 2011) was elaborated in 2008 that defined three main characteristic parts within the district. The northern part remained the administrative and business centre, while the area of the medieval city has been divided into two: the northern part of it visioned as the commercial and touristic hub of the city and the Southern Downtown as a lively, youthful, mostly residential area.

This is exactly the moment when the development documents first mention the Latin Quarter concept, referring to the regeneration of the Southern Downtown as an integrated university town, similar to the Latin Quarter of Paris (PAAP-AQSD, 2010). The reason why planners considered the area capable for this kind of image shift resides in the recognition and rediscovery of its original characteristics and values. Three main characteristics were considered. First, by now, this is the only mostly residential area in the district. Secondly, several prestigious educational institutions are present attracting a huge number of young people. And finally, it forms a very well located charming historic urban setting bordered by the river, with tiny streets and squares, valuable built heritage and monuments. Nevertheless, the volume of car traffic and the general run-down conditions of the environment impeded the spontaneous transformation of the area into a lively, attractive place, so that it remained out of the scope of tourists as well.



Culture and education in and around the Southern Downtown (orthophoto: Google Earth)

3.3. Implementation of the urban regeneration process in the Southern Downtown

A bifocal regeneration strategy was elaborated by the district municipality government, aiming to strengthen the economy of the area based on tourism, in order to get more funds for further development and to change the social degradation of the area, to stop or at least slow down depopulation and ageing and to convert the district into an attractive place for living. The main instruments to these objectives were the development of tourist attractions and related services and the rehabilitation of the built environment, concentrating primarily on public spaces, based on western examples like the Barcelona-model. Public space renewal offered fast and spectacular results and with the help of European subsidies it became an extremely popular tool for local politicians in Hungary during the 2000's. The first large-scale public space renewal project of the new local government was the New Main Street project in 2008-2010. An important traffic axis running parallel to Váci Street, the traditional commercial street of the area has been transformed into a high quality contemporary shared space, with the pedestrianized University Square in its focus, representing a new quality in urban design in Hungary with its contemporary design. As part of the Art Quarter of the Southern Downtown development program, the Main Street project has been complemented in 2013 with the renewal of some other linked residential streets. Great parts of the boulevards bordering the quarter have been renewed in recent years as well, creating a continuous network of people-friendly public spaces towards the surrounding quarters and districts. As the EU conditions required further project elements in line with the promotion of integrated urban rehabilitation, the projects included, amongst others, the organization of different cultural events and the renovation of publicly owned properties and their transformation into community places. However, the use of these places for cultural and art purposes is still missing in many cases. Intentions for developing local economy supposed intensive cooperation with private developers. There has been some advance, but the economic crisis delayed several projects like the construction of new hotels in the area. A great challenge for the future development of the quarter is the renewal of the traffic infrastructure dominated riverbanks and the inclusion of the riverside to the life of the city.



Renewed public spaces in the Southern Downtown and its vicinity (orthophoto: Google Earth)

3.4. Consequences and results of the urban regeneration process

As discussed before, the rehabilitation concepts were based on the recognition of the values and potentials of the area. The aim of the concepts was to reinforce these values and to let the existing potentials evolve. However, to overstep the existing situation there was a need for an external impact that could catalyse the process. Several factors indicate that large-scale public space rehabilitation was an appropriate tool for the regeneration of the Southern Downtown. These factors include the transformation of public spaces usage, functional changes (e.g. the abundance of amenities, functions related to creative industries and holiday accommodation) and social changes as well, similar to those described by Florida (2008) and Evans (2009).

A walkable urban environment was born with effervescent public life on its public spaces. The renewal of public spaces resulted the radical decrease of car-traffic in the quarter. The extension of pedestrian surfaces made the area more accessible and facilitated multiple use of the streets and squares with different activities and events taking place in various venues. People discovered the area and filled it with life showing a spectacular example of the possible transformation of a city that renews its public spaces as described by Gehl (2010).

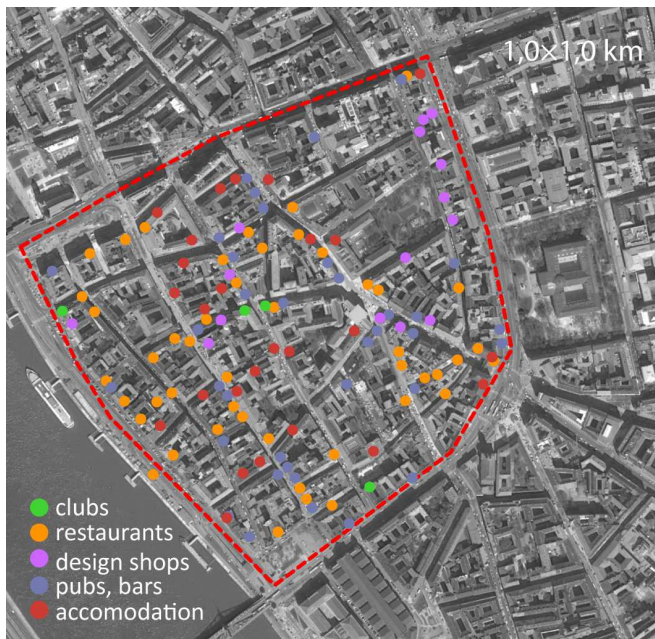
High quality public spaces invited people to hang around and to spend their leisure time in the quarter. The growing number of functions that primarily serve the demands of younger people (e.g. cafés, bars, music clubs, pubs and restaurants) marks the rediscovery of the area by its students. Public spaces offer these places open-air surfaces to move out and to make their business more profitable by receiving guests on the terraces as well. The flexible ground floor spaces of the historic building stock facilitate the adaptation of the area to these functional changes.

The attractive features of the area transformed it to an inspiring environment for several creative industries. An outstanding example is the emergence of a cluster of design shops and workshops that started as a bottom-up initiative parallel with the rehabilitation process. Although the fluctuation is rather fast, the number of retail units related to creative industries remains nearly constant.

The centrally located, attractive and lively urban environment with the broadening diversity of services started to attract tourists as well. Moderate prices and the bohemian atmosphere converted it to a popular backpackers' destination. An abundance of hostels, guesthouses and B&Bs primarily offers low-cost accommodation for visitors. A recent study by Kádár and Gede (2013) clearly shows that the area appeared on the tourist map of the city since the rehabilitation process had started.

Albeit the quarter gained popularity amongst visitors, it remained primarily a residential quarter. The implemented public space renewal projects paid respect to residents' demands (e.g. the need for parking

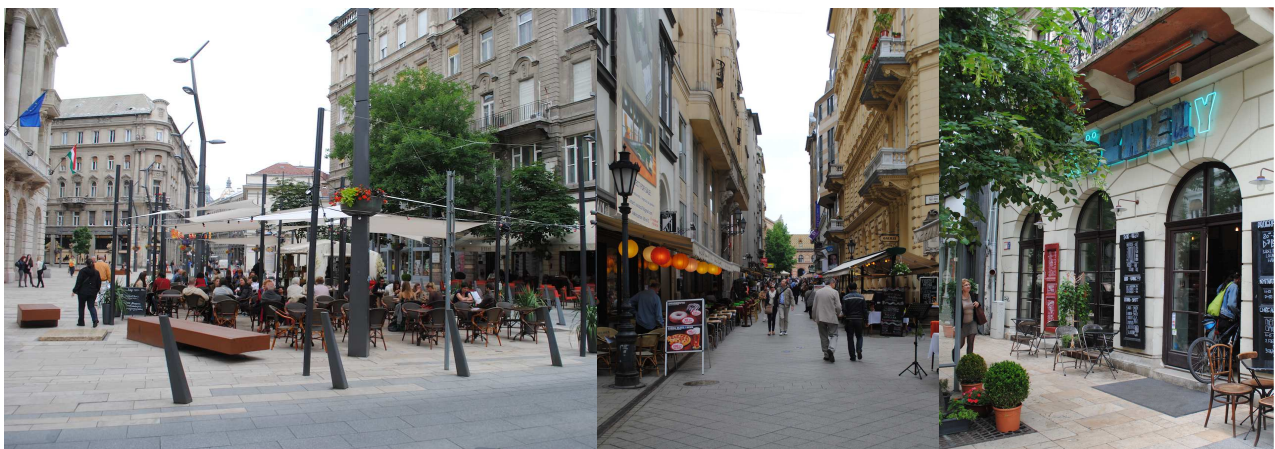
places on the streets or more green) and an upgrading process started due to the improvement of the urban environment.



“Bohemian” functions of the area (orthophoto: Google Earth)

4. OBSERVATIONS

The overview of the Latin Quarter model and the regeneration process of the Southern Downtown of Pest let us frame some basic observations. Unlike the Parisian model, where the evolution of the quarter was supported by the tenant-financed refurbishment and followed by a gradual upgrading that did not require large-scale urban developments, in the case of Budapest a top-down strategy was needed to give new direction to the transformation of the area. A further difference to the Parisian model is that in Budapest a rapid functional transformation accompanied the birth of the Latin Quarter, where in line with the spread of amenities and cultural facilities, at the same time the area became a popular tourist destination as well. Timing is an important issue of the regeneration process: fortunately the “external” intervention coincided with the transformation of the “internal” demands. It means that in line with the changes of the socio-cultural background a new generation has grown up that is able to appreciate the values and achievements of the Latin Quarter. However, one of the most important values of the area (i.e. the proximity of the Danube) still remained rather unexploited, so that the extension of the regeneration towards the riverbanks appears as an imperious task for the future.



The renewed University Square and other public spaces in the Southern Downtown

5. CONCLUSION

This study has explained the use of the example of the Parisian Latin Quarter as a model for the regeneration of the Southern Downtown of Budapest. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether a different cultural environment is able to host the example of a thematic quarter as a model for urban regeneration. The results of this investigation show that in the case of the Southern Downtown of Budapest the implication of a regeneration concept that used the Latin Quarter model as a reference led to a rapid and radical transformation: the area became an attractive destination for both locals and tourists offering a lively, youthful and bohemian atmosphere. It has been shown that the adaptation of a model that was selected prudentially based on the recognition of local particularities can help to facilitate the evolution of the potentials of the area. These findings enhance our understanding of the possibilities of adapting external models for the regeneration of historic city centres in East-Central European metropolises.

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